

What's in store for county's leaders

With the election over, it's time to get to work

|

With the election behind them, the county's leaders face historic challenges. While obstacles are present every year, this class of legislators faces some unique and difficult hurdles.

Here are some of the most pressing concerns:

Budget, budget, budget — Tight budgets have been the drumbeat of county politics for several years, and will remain so in 2011. The county faces a roughly \$160 million gap between revenue and spending for fiscal 2012 — which begins in July — and is running out of options to fill it. More than half of the gap — about \$85 million — comes from a mandated increase in school funding, which the county has maneuvered around in the past two years. The remainder comes from reinstating the unpaid leave county workers were required to take this year and expenses the county delayed in the current fiscal year, such as the purchase of vehicles.

Even if the county reinstitutes furloughs, that saves about \$15 million and other options are dwindling: capital investments can only be delayed for so long, the council is not inclined to raise taxes following the energy and cell phone hikes this year and putting off funding for retiree benefits will lead to greater problems in the future.

Also, county employees — whose salaries and benefits make up 80 percent of a \$4.3 billion budget — will be seeking raises following two consecutive years without a cost of living increase.

The county's approaches to patch the budget are unsustainable and a report on the long-term structural deficit expected soon should provide some guidance. The council and executive will have to change the way governments provide salaries and benefits to employees or explain to residents why services continue to be eroded.

Selection of a new schools superintendent —Jerry Weast is leaving the county school system next year after a 12-year run. Weast, at times a polarizing leader but always a champion for students, has made significant advances. His signature feat has been to close achievement gaps between affluent white students and low-income black and Hispanic students — in the class of 2010, for example, the graduation rate was 2.5 percent more than the previous year; for black students, it was 4 percent more.

The school board will decide on a replacement following a nationwide search. There has already been some hand-wringing about the process, after school board President Pat

O'Neill's suggested that a successor will likely not come from within the school system. Key stakeholders, including parents' groups, have a reasonable position in wanting to be part of the selection process. It is up to the board and its president to ensure a quality selection with input from those who share equal passion for the well-being of Montgomery's schoolchildren.

Council committee assignments — The departure of District 2 council member Mike Knapp and at-large member Duchy Trachtenberg will require shuffling on the standing council committees. Knapp headed the influential Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee and Trachtenberg was chairwoman of the Management and Fiscal Policy Committee.

Those committees will be prominent in the coming years as the council works through tight budgets and complex transportation issues. Knapp was a respected, moderate voice whose understanding of private industry is difficult to replace. Trachtenberg, despite some shortcomings, was an advocate for a closer examination of county spending.

County Council Vice President Valerie Ervin will likely determine the committee chairmanships, a largely political process done behind closed doors. In making changes, however, Ervin faces a tricky balancing act between political considerations and choosing the best person for each position.

Redistricting — This is another behind-the-scenes process that doesn't get a lot of attention, but will play a significant role in Montgomery's future. Based on 2010 Census data, a commission appointed by County Council will divide the county into five districts, each to be represented by a council member. These will be in effect for the 2014 election and, depending on how they are drawn, will alter who runs for office and who is elected. The commission's plan is due Nov. 15, 2011, and will be approved in the months after. This is another case where politics can play too great a role, and commission members — as well as council members — need to be mindful of short-term favors that carry long-term, adverse consequences.